

THE CAPE TOWN MEAT STRIKE

contributed by the Western Province General Workers' Union

The year 1980 has shown an upsurge in factory based worker action generally, in South Africa: the Frametex strike in Natal, the PUTCO strike in the Transvaal, the strike by Johannesburg City Council workers and the industry-wide strike by meat workers in Cape Town. It is the intention of this article to give a brief overview of the strike of the Cape Town meat workers, who are members of the Western Province General Workers Union.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE MEAT STRIKE

The W.P.G.W.U. is an unregistered trade union which has been operating in the Western Cape since 1973. The membership of the union is predominantly African, but there is a growing number of coloured members in the union. The union as a GENERAL workers' union is organised across industrial lines, with membership in factories in other industries besides the meat industry. It includes textile workers, engineering workers, building and allied workers, dockworkers, etc.

In all of the 18 meat factories in which the union was organised at the outset of the strike, the union enjoyed majority membership. In most of these factories there was 100% support, and in no factory less than 70% support. The union had committees in all but 3 of the 18 meat firms: Table Bay Cold Storage Company, National Meat Suppliers and Braams. In a minority of firms works committees had initially been established when these firms had first been organised in 1975 and 1976. Even at this early stage, however, the constitutions of these committees had been drawn up by the workers themselves under the auspices of the union, and did not approximate those drawn up by the Department of Manpower Utilisation. In most of these firms the registration of these committees had lapsed and they had continued as unregistered committees. In the majority of the meat firms, initial and continuing organisation had been through unregistered and non-racial workers' committees.

The union's objective is to establish a strong democratic factory-based worker organisation. The issue around which the meat workers went on strike was part of a struggle to achieve this.

THE STRIKE AT TABLE BAY COLD STORAGE

In April 1979, the workers in the 3 meat factories which did not as yet have committees to represent them, asked the union to write to their respective managements asking for recognition of unregistered workers committees. The workers at these factories were members of the union. The response of the Braams management was to agree almost immediately to their request. The response of the Table Bay management was to deny the right of the workers to

democratic organisation of their choice, and instead to offer the workers a liaison committee (a committee onto which half the members are appointed by management, and the manager acts as chairman of the committee) and to demand that the workers resign from their union, the W.P.G.W.U. The Table Bay workers attempted over a period of two weeks to negotiate with the management over this issue, urging consideration of their eminently reasonable demands. They ultimately resorted to strike action on the 7th May, having been faced with absolute intransigence on the part of the Table Bay management in meeting this demand.

The National Meat Suppliers (NMS) management's response was at first to adopt a 'wait and see' attitude at the beginning of the dispute at Table Bay Cold Storage. They later agreed to recognise an unregistered committee, but insisted that it represent African workers only.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDUSTRY-WIDE STRIKE OF CAPE TOWN'S MEAT WORKERS

The workers at other meat factories in Cape Town were concerned at the plight of their fellow workers at Table Bay Cold Storage. Between the 7th and 19th May, they attempted to negotiate with their own managements to put pressure on the Table Bay management to recognise the Table Bay workers' committee. The meat bosses' reaction was to refuse to discuss this issue with the workers, and to publicly express their support for the stand of the Table Bay management. The workers in the meat industry saw this as a challenge put out not only to the Table Bay workers, but to all the workers in the meat industry. They saw this as part of a general attempt on the part of the meat bosses to prevent further organisation and to begin undermining existing organisation. It was after attempts to resolve this issue peaceably had failed, that the Cape Town meat workers staged a 1-day sympathy strike in support of the Table Bay workers, on Monday 19th May.

On returning to work on Tuesday 20th May, the workers found all the firms surrounded by police and they were turned away. No attempts were made then or subsequently by the managements to discuss the issue with workers.

The workers decided to remain on strike until 3 demands were met:

- (1) the unconditional reinstatement of all 800 striking meat workers,
- (2) the recognition of an unregistered workers committee at Table Bay Cold Storage,
- (3) the recognition of an unregistered workers committee at NMS.

Workers called upon the community at large for support in 3 areas:

- (1) a boycott of red meat
- (2) financial support
- (3) persuading other workers not to 'scab'.

THE REACTION OF THE COMMUNITY

Support for the meat workers came from all sections of the black community: other workers, teachers, students, butchers, traders and many others. A support committee consisting of union representatives, representatives from sympathetic unions, community organisations and student organisations was formed to co-ordinate this support. Before the ban on meetings was introduced, several community meetings were addressed nightly by union organisers and meat workers. After the ban on meetings, support was sustained from within the community mainly on a door-to-door basis. There was also support from the more progressive sections of the white community.

(1) **RED MEAT BOYCOTT:** The boycott of red meat was endorsed by a large number of community organisations, schools, churches and fellow trade unions. The butchers in the African townships stopped selling red meat altogether for a period of 5 weeks. The workers' call to boycott meat nationally, was taken up in several other centres such as Durban, Pietermaritzburg and Johannesburg, where support committees were also formed.

(2) **FINANCIAL SUPPORT:** The Executive of the W.P.G.W.U. decided that the union should pay R15 per week relief payment to each meat worker, while the workers were out on strike. This was so that the workers would not be 'starved' back to work. This meant a weekly bill of about R12 000 for the union. By the end of the strike the total cost had been R159 765. Union members paid a voluntary R1,00 weekly contribution towards the meat workers, in excess of their subscriptions. But this bill could obviously not be met by the union alone. The amount collected from the community was overwhelming. R100 323,54 was donated by the public – from community organisations all over the Cape Flats, from schools and churches, from UCT and UWC, from fellow trade unions and sympathetic individuals. The vast bulk of the money was collected in individual donations of small but regular contributions. Donations were received not only from Cape Town, but also from Johannesburg, Durban, Pietermaritzburg and other towns of the Western Cape.

(3) **PREVENTION OF 'SCABBING':** Various attempts were made within the community to persuade other workers not to take the jobs of the meat workers. Meetings were held over this issue in the African and coloured communities. In the initial stages of the strike these appeals had some effect, and some workers who had taken jobs at the abattoirs since the strike left these jobs. In the long run, however, with the high rate of unemployment, total prevention of scabbing was impossible to implement. The abattoirs did manage to fill part of their labour requirements, albeit not altogether satisfactorily, as the new workers had not yet acquired the skills for the jobs.

(4) **ATTEMPTS AT MEDIATION:** Leading public figures and sections of the press continuously urged the management of the meat industry and the State, to heed the calls being made by the workers for democratic organisation, and to negotiate with the workers over their demands. Attempts to mediate in the dispute all failed. Attempts were made at the start of the strike by a number of black butchers belonging to WEPCOC and the Western Cape Traders Association. The South African Council of Church and representatives from other organisations including the Progressive Federal Party also attempted to mediate. However, the meat bosses' attitude was marked by a constant refusal to talk. In the words of one of the butchers, "the

meat bosses do not know the meaning of discussion and negotiation – they arrive at their own decisions and simply pass down orders."

THE REACTIONS OF THE STATE

The direction of State involvement in the meat strike became clear fairly early on – it was clear connivance with the meat bosses to smash progressive trade unionism amongst workers. A spokesman of the Table Bay Cold Storage Company, where the dispute began, went so far as to state publicly on 4th July that negotiations of a settlement had been taken out of the firm's hands and were 'in the hands of the government. The State used its repressive apparatus to 'settle' the strike. Organisers of the W.P.G.W.U. were detained and harassed and the union offices were searched. The general ban on meetings included those at which strikes were discussed. The pass laws were used to endorse out 42 contract workers from Table Bay Cold Storage. The floor price of meat was raised on 2nd June – a clear attempt to cushion the effects of the meat strike and boycott of red meat products. As in the Frametex and Municipal workers' strikes, the State's manner of dealing with labour disputes was by direct intervention on the side of the bosses, discouraging negotiation. It was apparent that the State together with the meat bosses had taken a decision to use all means to prevent the workers from winning their demands in the strike. The manner in which the meat strike was dealt with by the bosses and the State has demonstrated the hollowness of the new labour dispensation, as a concession to worker rights. It showed quite clearly the contempt for true representativity based on worker support for these organisations.

THE RESILIENCE OF THE MEAT WORKERS

The meat workers were out on strike for 12 weeks. Despite the hardships they were forced to endure by subsistence on R15 per week, their commitment remained unshaken. For the whole duration of the strike, only 13 workers out of a total of 800 applied for their jobs back. The degree of unity and their resilience are unquestionable. The decision to end the strike was taken in the face of the failure of 12 weeks' attempts to settle the strike, and of little remaining hope of resolving the issue through negotiation. The workers felt it would be better therefore to end the strike in an organised and united manner.

CONCLUSIONS

The immediate aims of the meat workers were defeated primarily by the combined strength of the State and management. However some important issues have emerged as longer-term lessons from the meat strike.

The strike broke important ground in that meat factory workers came out on strike in SUPPORT of the demands of workers in one factory – i.e. in support of their fellow union members' demands for representation. This showed the depth of their unity as workers and union members.

The meat strike has also provided an indication of the depth of commitment to democratic organisation amongst workers. It has shown that the days of workers accepting racist undemocratic bodies forced upon them by management or the State as instruments of control, are over. In this, the workers and the community have demonstrated their unity. The meat workers' demand for democratic representation struck a chord within the black community as a whole. This was a demand being echoed also within other spheres of the community. This unity is no doubt an indication of future trends. □